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PRESS RELEASE

Medicinal Plants in North Africa: Linking Conservation and Livelihoods

IUCN along with the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation is promoting conservation of biodiversity in North Africa

Malaga, 18 April 2005 (IUCN- The World Conservation Union) – About 70% of the wild plants in North Africa are known to be of potential value in fields such as medicine, biotechnology and crop improvements (UNEP, 2002). With increased demands for the resources available, a number of important plant species have become scarce in areas where they were previously abundant. If their collection and use is not regulated, some species may become threatened with extinction. The World Conservation Union has been engaged since 1994 in a programme aimed at promoting the conservation of biodiversity in North Africa, developing the sustainable use of natural resources and empowering local communities, in particular women, in biodiversity conservation, as well as creating a platform for experience sharing and exchange of knowledge and information.

The North Africa Biodiversity Programme (NABP) has been carried out by IUCN State and NGOs members in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and Egypt, and has been funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC).

“Medicinal and aromatic plants are an excellent entry point for making the case of how biodiversity conservation is directly linked to improvement of livelihoods. The scientific output of the Programme generated ample knowledge on methods to germinate, propagate and cultivate the plants, therefore providing an alternative to their collection from the wild. This new knowledge was transferred to the local communities, who use those plants themselves, as well as depend on them economically due to their market value”, commented Rami A. Salman, Programme Coordinator of IUCN Centre for Mediterranean Cooperation.

Regional compendium on medicinal plants

Local communities, such as the Bedouins in Egypt, possess invaluable knowledge of nature. This traditional knowledge is being gathered, documented and fed into a regional compendium on medicinal plants. This compendium, containing scientific information on more than hundred plant species in North Africa, will be available by the end of April on a database accessible through the NABP website. The experts involved in this work were Dr Farag Abdul Rahman, Dr Salima Benhouhou, Prof Rachid Chemli, Dr Zainab Ghrabi, Dr Faiza Hammouda, Dr Driss Lamnaouer and Prof Kamal Batanouny, who also acted as chair of the committee of experts.

This compendium is one of the outcomes of the last Phase (2001-2005) of the NABP which focused on endangered and economically useful medicinal and aromatic plants. It aimed at promoting their conservation in North Africa and promoting indigenous knowledge and the equitable participation of people in their management and conservation.

More than 30 organizations, numerous local NGOs and a varying number of individuals and government actors have collaborated in its implementation through a range of activities in every country. Co-funding was also secured for several components of the Programme. In Morocco, the project of valorisation of medicinal plants was set up with partners, which were the local authorities, the “Centre de Développement de la Région de Tensift”, GTZ, the “Direction Provinciale de l’Agriculture” (DPA), the Toubkal National Park, the Service Provincial des Eaux et Forêt de Marrakech, local population and the Faculty of Sciences Cadi Ayyad. In Tunisia, the Ministry of Environment provided the Programme Coordination Office until 2004.

Economic value of medicinal plants

Most people in rural areas rely primarily on medicinal and aromatic plants for treating health problems and for other uses such as cosmetics, perfumes and food. Even in urban areas there is a growing recognition that natural products have fewer or even no side effects. In the UK alone, herbal remedy trade is worth more than £200 (293 Euros) million per year.

As part of the project, medicinal and aromatic plants were cultivated in nurseries, where trials of propagation were undertaken. The knowledge acquired was then transmitted to local communities. In Algeria, pilot projects linked cultivation of medicinal plants, rural development and gender empowerment. Four women-run farms committed to growing medicinal plants on their prime arable land, in order to sell them to local herbalists, improving thereby their revenue.

Case study: Egypt

Most Egyptians rely on modern medicines, though herbalists and their shops are still thriving. The Bedouin communities, with a much stronger traditional culture, have a real interest in medicinal plants. There is a big demand for medicinal plants in Egypt, but most of this is for export to the USA and Europe. Of the 2000 species of plants in Egypt, 1000 occur within 30 km of the Mediterranean coast. A large number of Egypt's plants have become rare or extinct, however, due to habitat destruction, overgrazing, and over harvesting.

The Governor of El-Hamman donated 5400 square meters of land to the Programme for the construction of The Centre and Garden for the Conservation of Endangered Plants. This Centre was built to conserve medicinal plants currently under threat in North Africa, as well as serve as an education and awareness centre for the entire region. Trials to cultivate the plants under different conditions and propagate them are undertaken in the Garden and transplants and propagules were exchanged with the nurseries of the Bedouin communities, so that they could cultivate the plants in micro-nurseries. Four micro-nurseries, established with the Bedouin communities on their lands, along with around twenty smaller ones, focus on the sustainable use of medicinal plants.

The cultivation of these plants is a new concept for the Bedouins, and has slowly caught on, due to both a diminishing availability of plants from the wild, and the realization that a market can be found for both medicinal and culinary uses. These nurseries have been a decisive factor in significantly reducing the uncontrolled gathering of endangered plant species.

Other activities

At the very beginning of the NABP, it was noted that local populations were little aware of the richness of the natural heritage of the region and of the role they could play in its conservation and sustainable use. It was therefore essential to focus on environmental education and the generation of information on biodiversity in the region, through a series of fact-sheets in Arabic and English or French. A number of other awareness and environmental education activities took place in each country, including the training of local communities on cultivation and sustainable use of medicinal plants, fruit trees, as well as other biodiversity resources such as carob trees and honey.

MORE INFORMATION ON THE NORTH AFRICA BIODIVERSITY PROGRAMME ON:

<http://iucn.org/places/medoffice/nabp/index.html>

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